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Education and Youth Transitions across Britain 1984-2002

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Education and Youth Transitions across Britain 1984-2002

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Introduction

This Briefing looks at broad trends in young people's experiences of education during the 1980s and 1990s and locates them in the context of very considerable social, economic and policy change. It considers trends that were common throughout Britain, and also the extent to which these varied across the national territories. The findings come from an ESRC-funded research project entitled *Education and Youth Transitions in England, Wales and Scotland 1984-2002* (the EYT project). The empirical evidence about young people's experiences comes from time-series data derived from the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (YCS) and the Scottish School Leavers Surveys (SSLS). The briefing is based on a fuller paper (Croxford *et al*/2006).

Key findings

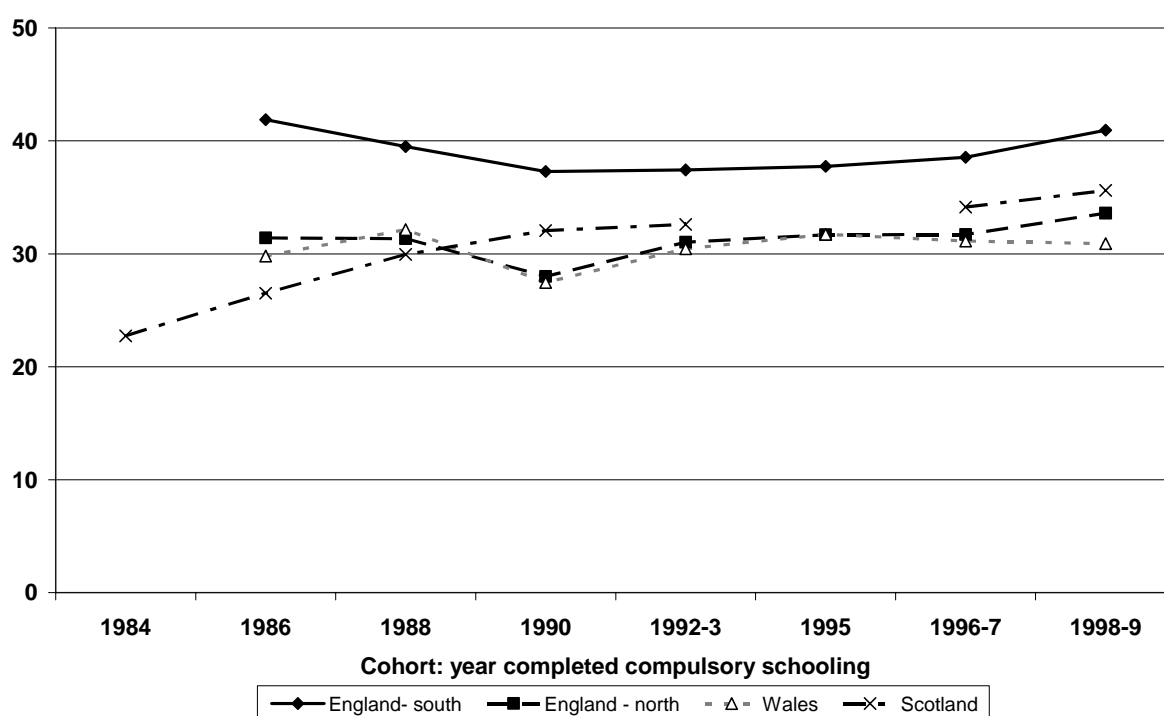
- ❑ Young people's experiences of education have changed over the two decades: in the early 1980s more than half of 16-year olds stated that "School has done little to prepare me for life after school", but the numbers feeling this way declined to just a third by 1999.
- ❑ Levels of participation in post-compulsory education increased dramatically between 1986 and 1992/3, especially among young people in the middle and lower attaining groups.
- ❑ Levels of attainment at the compulsory and post-compulsory stages have risen almost continuously over the two decades, with the attainment of young women rising more rapidly than that of young men.
- ❑ There were differences between the north and south of England, with higher levels of participation and attainment associated with higher average socio-economic status in the south. However, this did not translate into greater participation in Higher Education (HE) in the south.
- ❑ There were differences between the experiences of young people in Scotland compared with the rest of Britain - in particular, more young people achieved post-compulsory qualifications and entered higher education in Scotland than elsewhere.
- ❑ The different education system in Scotland was the key factor. The socio-economic context of Scotland was similar to that in the north of England and Wales, but attainment of post-compulsory qualifications and entry to HE were substantially higher in Scotland than in the south of England.

Changes in the Societal Context

The two-decades covered by this research are the 1980s and 1990s, during which the cumulative effects of social and economic change originating earlier in the century - especially changes in the industrial structure of Britain, the decline in manufacturing industry and related decline in the proportion of workers in manual employment – changed the context of education. The early 1980s, in which the youth cohort surveys were initiated, were characterised by sharp falls in the demand for minimum-age low-qualified school leavers, and consequent development of government sponsored youth training schemes to address the problems of youth unemployment. The period saw radical changes in the youth labour market coupled with increasing participation in post-16 education.

Over the two decades, the labour market has demanded higher levels of educational qualifications, as an increasing proportion of the work force are engaged in “white collar” jobs. The need for the education system to develop the skills and talents required in the knowledge-based economy has been re-iterated by policy makers. Similarly, young people and their parents have increasingly been made aware of the importance of educational qualifications as a means of opening career opportunities.

Figure 1: Change over time in parents' social class¹: % of parents in managerial or professional occupations



Education policies in previous decades have themselves played a part in social change. In particular, the increased provision of free public education after the war, and subsequent raising of the school

¹ The last three Scottish cohorts do not coincide exactly with the England and Wales cohorts, but for simplicity of presentation, the Scottish 1992, 1996 and 1998 cohorts are included with the 1993, 1997 and 1999 cohorts respectively. There was no Scottish survey of the 1994 cohort.

Cohort surveys in England and Wales prior to 1990 did not provide detailed occupation codes for parents. The 1984 cohort for E&W is omitted because it did not include independent schools.

leaving age to 15 in 1947, and 16 in 1972, meant that the parents of the school students of the 1980s and 1990s have themselves experienced increasing levels of education. Data from the youth cohort surveys show some of the impact of societal change on the family background of survey respondents: increasing proportions of parents had post-compulsory education (table not shown), and were in managerial or professional occupations (Figure 1).

The cohort surveys also show regional variations in overall levels of parental background and relative change over time. For example, levels of parental education and managerial/professional status were higher in the south of England² than elsewhere in Britain, and this reflects strong regional differences in economic prosperity and the impact of economic change. The upward trends in levels of parental education and managerial/professional employment were clearest in Scotland where the rate of increase in these measures over the 1980s and 1990s was greater than in England and Wales. However, the proportion of parents with post-16 education or managerial/professional occupations in Scotland did not catch up with those in the south of England.

During the 1980s and 1990s there have been increasing opportunities for women in education and the labour market, following the reduction of barriers by the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act. The effects of these changes include increasing rates of employment and educational participation by women. For example, in the Scottish cohort surveys the proportion with mothers working full-time unpaid in the home decreased from 25% in 1984 to 11% in 1998.

Differences between the education systems of England, Wales and Scotland

The education and training systems of the three national territories share many common features which reflect distinctively British patterns of attainment, participation and transition, but there are significant differences between them (Raffe et al 1999). There may be further divergence following the creation of the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales in 1999.

A key difference between their school systems arises because in Wales and Scotland secondary schools are more comprehensive, and characterised by more social mixing compared with the diverse range of state schools in England (Croxford and Paterson forthcoming). In England the independent sector is larger than elsewhere in Britain and there are also more single-sex and “faith” schools. There were regional differences within England in the coverage of the comprehensive system, with 80% of young people in the south of England attending schools that were at least nominally comprehensive, compared with 90% in the north of England, 95% in Scotland and 98% in Wales.

Policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s and 1990s a number of important developments in education and training occurred. The implementation of these changes took slightly different forms in the three national territories:

- ❑ *Creation of quasi-markets in education.* This went further in England than in Scotland or Wales.

² For this analysis the south of England comprises four government office regions: south-west, south-east, east of England and London. Although government office regions were not defined in the early youth cohort surveys, we allocated these retrospectively.

- ❑ *New systems of assessment and certification at age 16.* The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in England and Wales and Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) Standard Grade in Scotland provided systems of certification for a much wider range of abilities than hitherto.
- ❑ *Curriculum change.* The introduction of a common curriculum framework in Scotland from 1983, and National Curriculum in England and Wales following the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA).
- ❑ *New types of vocational qualifications.* These were introduced (and modified) in the 1980s and 1990s in response to the perceived need to raise skill levels in Britain, to improve its economic competitiveness and to provide appropriate opportunities for the increasing proportion of the cohort staying on in full-time education. Overall, levels of participation in vocational qualifications tended to be lower in Scotland than in England. However, in all three systems vocational qualifications have tended to be regarded with lower esteem than academic qualifications (Raffe *et al* 2001), and to be less well understood by the respondents to youth cohort surveys.
- ❑ *Government-supported training.* The Youth Training Scheme (YTS) introduced in 1983, was the first of a series of national programmes that aimed to provide 16-18 year olds with integrated programmes of work experience and training. Over the years an increasing proportion of participants have been employees rather than trainees.
- ❑ *Expansion of participation in Higher Education (HE).* Since the 1980s there has been a period of rapid expansion in HE, and in 1992 the former polytechnics and "old" universities were brought into a single system. The HE system in Scotland has a number of differences compared to elsewhere in Britain, including greater provision of HE qualifications in further education (FE) colleges (Iannelli 2005).

Table 1³: Experiences of school and subsequent destinations of the 1986 and 1998/9 cohorts (%)

	1986 cohort	1998/9 cohort
Experiences of school		
Achieved 5+ awards at A-C in national examinations at age 16	26	52
Did not achieve any examination passes at age 16	42	21
Left full-time education at age 16	58	28
Agreed: "School has done little to prepare me for life after school"	53	34
Played truant in last year of compulsory schooling (Y11 or S4)	53	36
Main activity at age 16		
Full-time education	42	72
Full-time job	22	9
Government supported training	26	9
Unemployed	8	5
other	2	4
Main activity at age 18		
Full-time education	20	41
Full-time job	63	31
Government supported training	3	8
Unemployed	8	7
other	6	13
Outcomes at age 18		
Achieved level 3 qualification (academic or vocational)	21	47
Achieved 2+ A-levels or 3+ Highers	15	33
In Higher Education	11	27
Studying for a degree	9	22

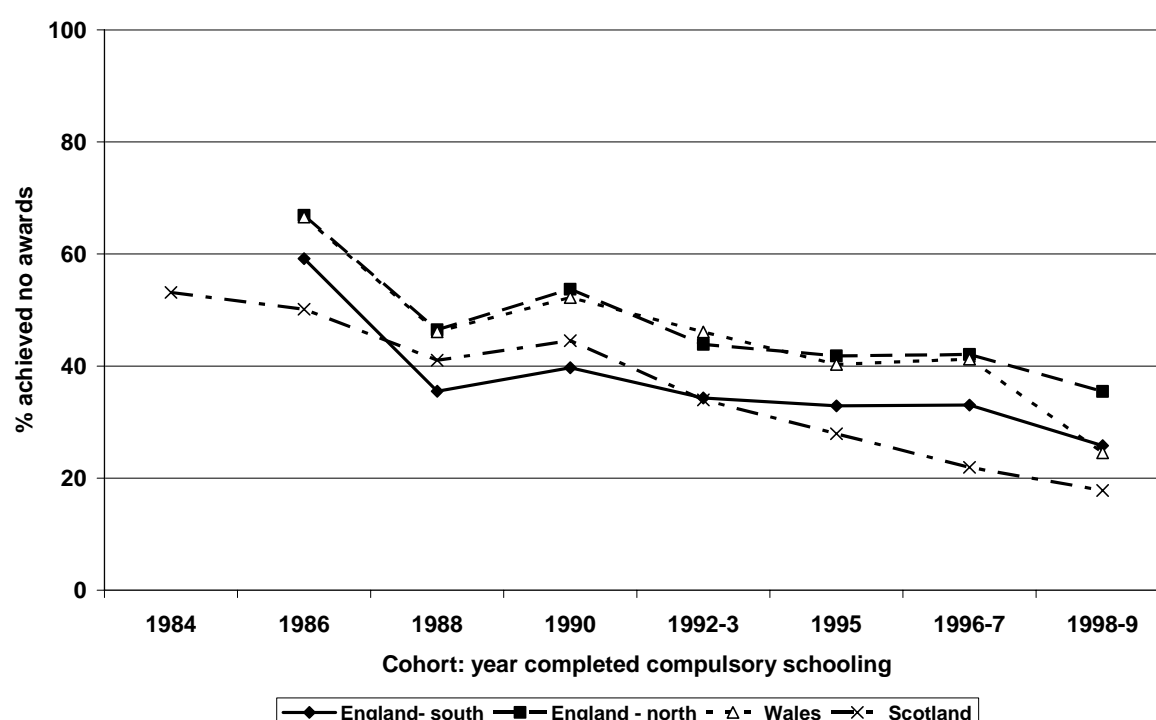
Changes in young people's experiences in compulsory schooling

³ In Table 1 data for England, Wales and Scotland are combined (and the cases are weighted to compensate for the larger sampling fraction in Scottish surveys); the 1986 cohort is used as the early time point rather than the 1984 cohort which excluded independent schools in England and Wales; the 1998/9 cohort refers to the 1998 cohort for Scotland and the 1999 cohort for England and Wales.

In the mid-1980s, over 40% of young people did not achieve any examination passes by age 16, 58% left education at the end of compulsory schooling, and over half felt that school had done little to prepare them for life after school. At that time, secondary education was geared to the more academically able pupils, but over the 1980s and 1990s there were considerable changes in school systems, including widening participation in examinations. By the end of the 1990s the proportion with no exam success was halved and over half of the cohort attained 5+ awards at A-C. More young people felt positive about education: by the end of the 1990s, the proportion of young people who left education at 16 had fallen to less than a third, while two-thirds of young people disagreed with the statement that school had done little to prepare them for life after school.

To some extent these experiences differed for females compared with males. On average, females achieved higher attainment than males throughout the period, and the gap widened because the average attainment of females rose more rapidly than that of males. These upward trends in attainment and gender differences were found in each of the British education systems, but the gender gap widened over time, faster in England and Wales than in Scotland.

Figure 2: Decline in low attainment over time: % achieved no awards at A-C in GCSE or SG at age 16



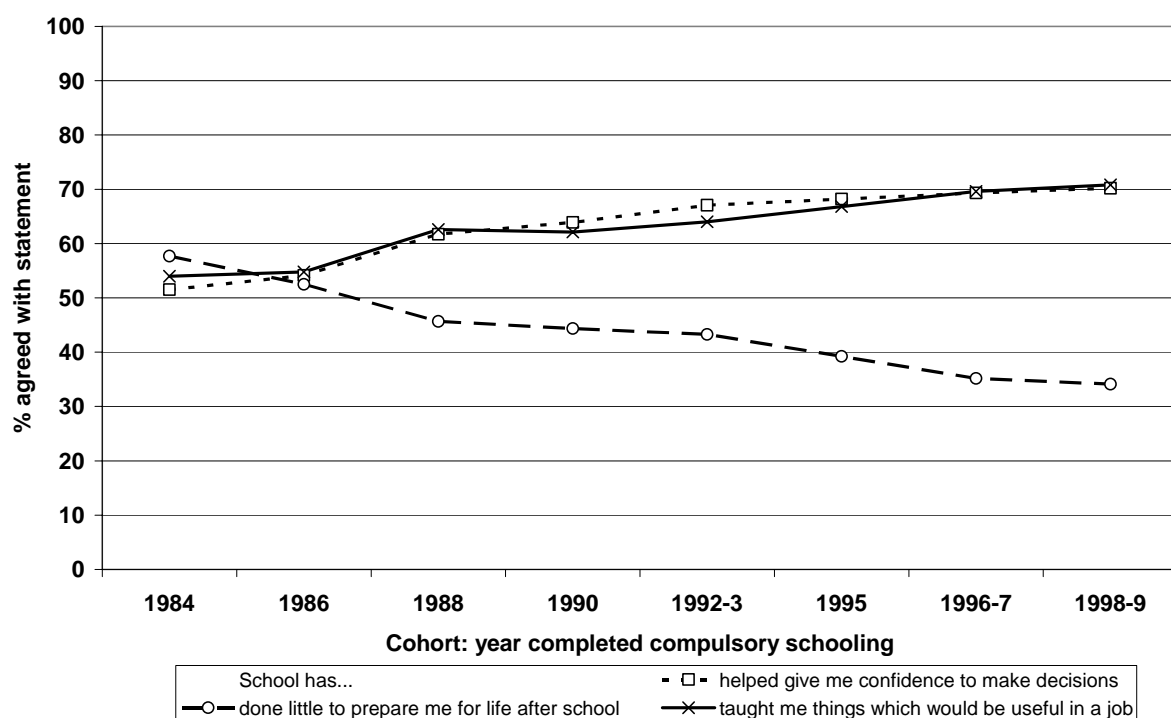
The proportion of young people who failed to gain any exam passes at A-C fell substantially over the two decades (Figure 2). The sharp decline in low attainment between the 1986 and 1988 cohorts is undoubtedly the impact of the introduction of new examination systems throughout Britain that were designed to encompass a wide range of ability. On average the proportion with no awards at A-C was lower in the south of England than in the north of England or Wales, and this reflects regional differences in socio-economic context, as illustrated in Figure 1 above. However, if we compare the trends for the south of England with those in Scotland we see that socio-economic context has less

impact than the differences between national education systems. Scotland's socio-economic context had more in common with the north of England and Wales, but Scotland in the late 1990s had fewer low attainers than the south of England, and we may suggest that this may be a reflection of a more inclusive education system in Scotland.

Young people's perceptions of their school experiences

Young people were asked what they thought of their last two years of compulsory schooling, and their responses suggest that young people are becoming increasingly positive about their school experience (Figure 3). There are clear upward trends in the proportions of young people who agreed that school helped give them confidence to make decisions and taught them things which would be useful in a job. Similarly, increasing proportions of young people disagreed with the statement that school has done little to prepare them for life after school. These trends did not vary between the north or south of England or between England and Wales. In Scotland the questions were not asked until 1992, at which point attitudes were similar to those in England and Wales, and thereafter the trend towards positive attitudes to school is a little steeper in Scotland than elsewhere.

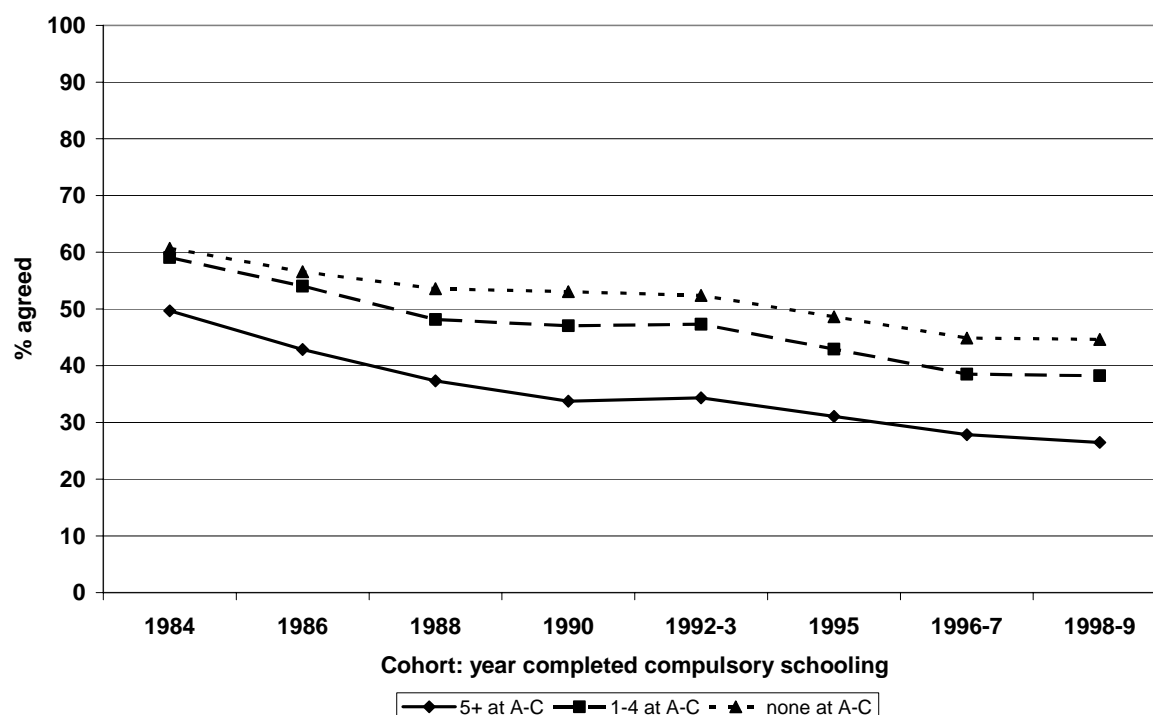
Figure 3: Young people's perceptions of school (% agreed with statement)



Perceptions of school were associated with young people's attainment at age 16 (illustrated by Figure 4). Those with low levels of attainment (no awards at A-C/1-3) were much more likely to think that "School has done little to prepare me for life after school" than those with high attainment. Although the proportion of each attainment group expressing negative perceptions of the usefulness of school declined over the period, there was a widening gap in perceptions between low and high attainers (of

the 1986 cohort, 57% of low attainers, 54% of mid-attainers and 43% of high attainers agreed that "School has done little to prepare me for life after school", and the corresponding proportions of the 1998-9 cohort were 45%, 38% and 26%). We might expect that females would have more positive attitudes to school than males, especially in view of their higher average attainment, but there was no evidence of gender differences in attitudes to school, and the increasingly positive attitudes were shown by both males and females.

Figure 4: "School has done little to prepare me for life after school" (% agreed by attainment at 16)



Post-16 participation

The school to work transition changed dramatically over the 1980s and 1990s. At the start of the 1980s the majority of young people entered the labour market at age 16, although jobs were becoming scarce and unemployment rising. Government-supported youth training schemes were the main labour market activity for young people in the 1986 cohort, especially young men. By the late 1990s the flow of entrants to the labour market aged 16-18 was greatly reduced, as more young people remained in full-time education for longer periods.

Our measure of post-16 participation is based on responses to questions about main activity in the spring approximately nine months after the end of compulsory schooling. Throughout Britain, overall levels of participation rose sharply until 1992-3, and then remained steady through the 1990s. Post-16 participation is strongly associated with attainment at age 16, and the vast majority of high attainers (ie those with 5+A-C awards) stayed on in full-time education throughout the period. Young people with medium or low attainment were much less likely to stay on in education during the 1980s, but there was a sharp increase in their participation in the early 1990s, reaching a peak in 1992/3. The overall

increase in post-16 participation is partly, but not wholly, explained by rising levels of attainment in compulsory schooling (Shapira and Howieson 2005). Changes in the labour market, and in HE, have weakened the 'pull' of young people out of education at 16 and increased the incentives to stay on. The changing balance of incentives may help to explain the levelling off and then the slight decline in participation rates in England from 1992-3. Hayward et al (2005) suggest that the recovery of the labour market, including an expansion of demand for less-qualified workers, meant that the return to continuing in education became more marginal for those with lower GCSE qualifications who began to leave full-time education at 16 or 17 to enter the labour market.

Main activity at age 18

There was a further survey of each cohort of young people two years and nine months after the end of compulsory schooling, when they were aged approximately 18. In this section we report on the activities at age 18 of (1) those who had left school at the end of compulsory education and (2) those who remained in full-time education after the compulsory stage.

The early leavers. As we have seen from Table 1, the numbers of young people who had left school at the end of compulsory education fell very substantially over the period. At age 18, the vast majority of early leavers were in the labour market, but their likelihood of being in a full-time job declined over the 1980s and 90s (Shapira and Howieson 2005). Some of the shortfall in employment was made up by government-supported training, and there was a small increase in the proportions returning to full-time education, but there was also an increase in the category of early leavers who were not in (full-time) education, employment or training (NEET).

Those who remained in full-time education post-16. Throughout the period, the majority of those who started post-16 education were still in full-time education at 18, and the proportion of this group entering labour market destinations at 18 declined substantially over time.

Occupations of young people who entered the labour market

Although there was a strong downward trend in the proportions of young people entering the labour market at age 16, the occupations they entered remained remarkably stable over the period (table not shown). Fifty percent of the young men who were in full-time jobs or training at age 16 were in craft and related occupations, and this proportion varied by no more than four percentage points until the 1998-9 cohort when it fell to 42%. There was a similar stable trend in the occupations of young men at age 18. Forty percent of the young men who were in full-time jobs or training at age 18 were in craft and related occupations, and this proportion fell gradually to 31 percent of the 1998-9 cohort (Shapira forthcoming).

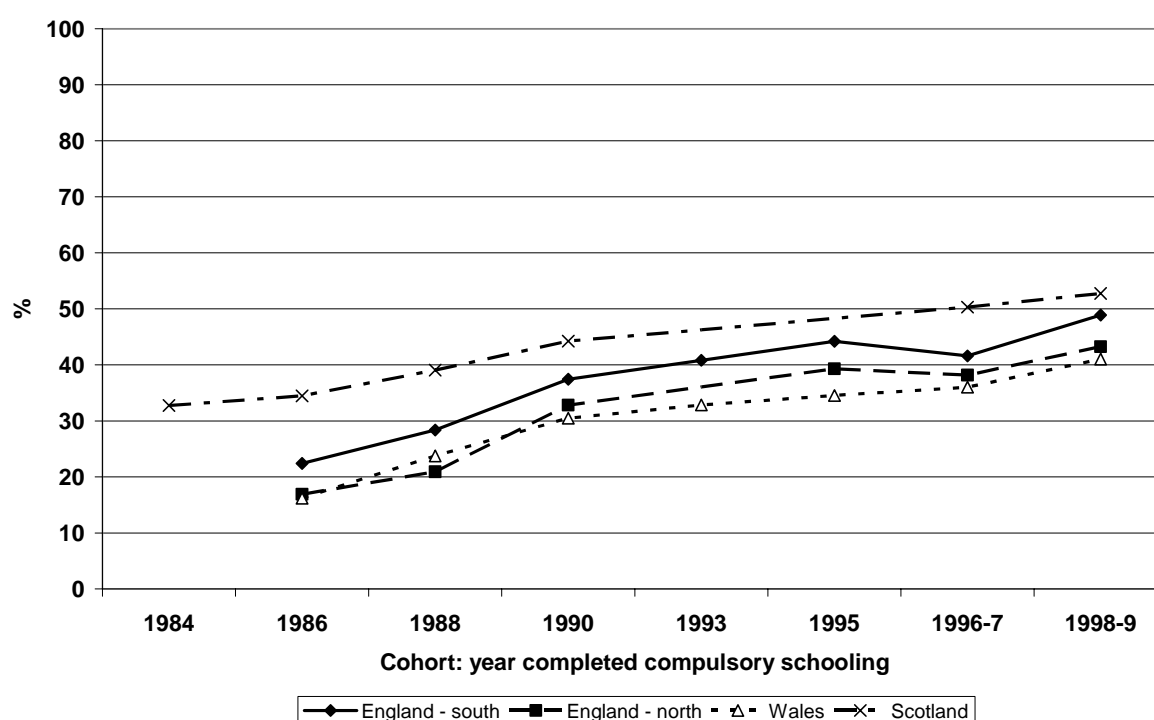
This relative stability in the occupational destinations of young men contrasts with the picture of dramatic structural change painted by the contemporary literature on the youth labour market. This described a "collapse" of youth employment in craft and related occupations (Elias and McKnight 1998). We believe that the reason for the difference in findings is that other analyses focus on the decline in numbers of young males entering craft and related occupations, which is influenced partly by the declining population of 16-year olds, and partly by the decline in numbers entering the labour market. A further factor is the shift of craft and related employment from 'ordinary' jobs to government supported

training as this became more employment based as noted earlier (although it is difficult to separate these in the survey data). Our findings suggest that although the numbers of young men entering the full-time labour market have shrunk considerably, the occupations they enter have not changed to a very great extent.

Outcomes at age 18

Educational outcomes of 18-year olds have also changed over the 1980s and 1990s. Comparison of attainment over time is complicated by the introduction of new qualifications, and comparison across Britain is further complicated by differences in the structure of qualifications. In order to make these comparisons we have used the National Qualification Framework (NQF), and applied definitions of NQF levels retrospectively to the qualifications achieved by early cohorts. The NQF combines both academic and vocational qualifications, and level 3 includes A-levels, AS levels and SCE Higher Grade as well as level 3 vocational qualifications. Figure 5 shows that overall levels achievement of a qualification at NQF level 3 by age 18 increased substantially over the 1980s and 1990s.

Figure 5: Achieved qualification at level 3 by age 18 (%) (academic and vocational qualifications combined)

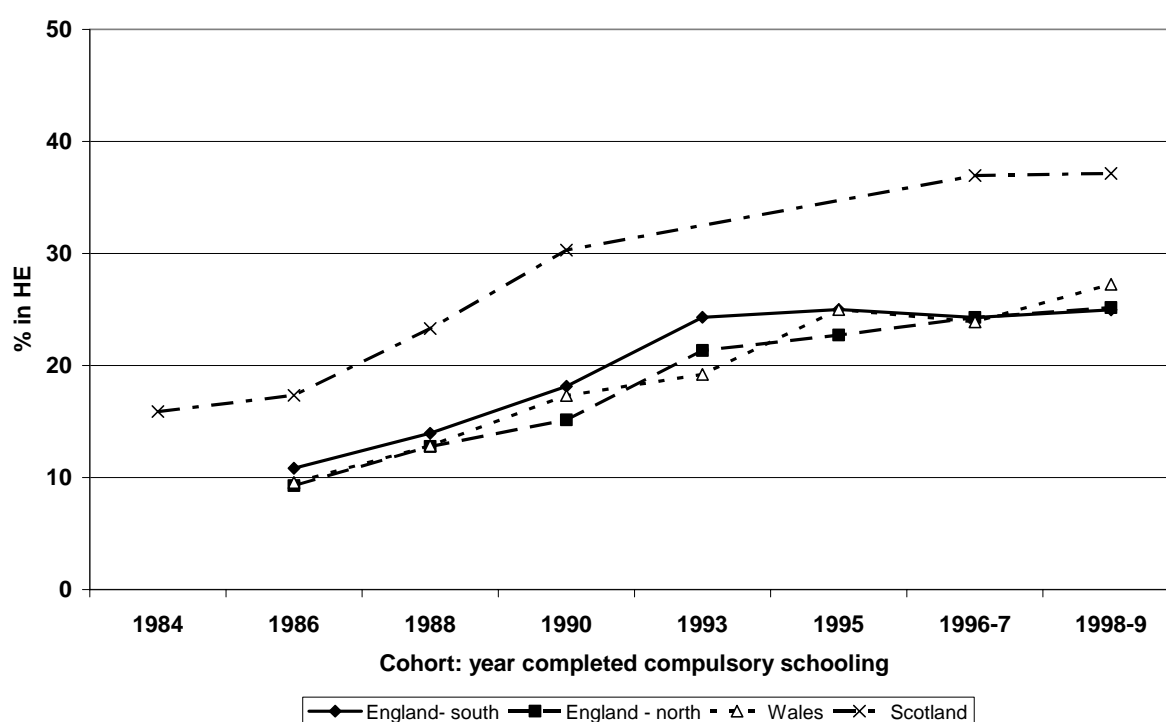


For Britain as a whole, the proportion gaining level 3 qualifications has risen from a fifth of the cohort to almost a half (Table 1). However, the proportion of young people in Scotland who achieved level 3 was significantly greater than elsewhere in Britain, although there was some evidence that the gap was narrowing. There are some fluctuations in the trends for England and Wales, which may be a consequence of changes in survey design rather than real-world changes (see *CES Briefing No 38*).

Entry to Higher Education

In the early years 1980s higher education was an experience enjoyed by just a small minority: 11% had entered HE by age 18, and just 9% were studying for a degree (Table 1). Over the 1980s and 1990s an increasing proportion of young people throughout Britain entered HE courses (degree and sub-degree) by age 18⁴ (Figure 6). Throughout the period a striking difference in levels of participation between Scotland and the rest of Britain was evident – in the 1980s a significantly greater proportion of Scots entered HE, and the gap widened in the course of the 1990s. We might expect that the proportion in HE would be higher in the south of England than in the north of England or Wales, in view of regional differences in socio-economic context and attainment. Indeed, entry to HE was a little higher in the south of England than in the north of England until the mid 1990s, but thereafter the rates of entry converged. It appears that socio-economic context has less impact on entry to HE than the differences between national education systems. Scotland's socio-economic context had more in common with the north of England and Wales, but Scotland in the late 1990s had far more young people in HE than the south of England.

Figure 6: In Higher Education at age 18 (% of whole cohort)



Most of the difference in participation levels between the national systems relates to entry to degree courses, but there are also differences in levels of participation in sub-degree courses: participation in

⁴ Because of the timing of the youth cohort surveys, our time series includes only those young people who entered HE by the end of the 3rd post-compulsory year, and excludes any who delayed their entry for any reason.

sub-degree courses in Scotland increased from 3% to 8%, but remained at 3-4% in England and Wales (Iannelli 2005).

Another striking difference between Scotland and England and Wales relates to the percentage of young people who were still studying for non-advanced qualifications, including A-level, at age 18-19 (table not shown). The percentage is particularly high in England and Wales, but very low in Scotland. It appears that about 5-6% of young people south of the border may have been attempting to gain sufficient A-levels for entry to HE while their counterparts in Scotland had gained sufficient Highers to enter HE (Iannelli 2005).

Rates of participation in HE by both men and women increased over time, but the rate of increase by women was greater than that by men. Thus, in the 1990s women in HE began to outnumber men in all three countries. The trend started earlier in Scotland (since the beginning of the 1990s) than in England and Wales (from 1996 onwards) (Iannelli 2005).

Conclusion

Over the 1980s and 1990s there was enormous expansion of participation and attainment in education throughout Britain. This expansion took place within a context of social, economic and policy change. It is not possible to isolate causal factors in the expansion, since the societal context, administrative systems and social relations were all changing and interacting. However, we might note that the introduction of more inclusive examination systems - GCSE and Standard Grade - at the start of the period removed a major barrier to educational expansion. A key issue is the effects of educational expansion on social class inequalities. This is the subject of a companion Briefing (Raffe *et al* 2006).

Differences within Britain are important. Average parental social class was higher in the south of England than elsewhere in Britain, and average attainment was higher in the south of England than in the north of England or Wales. However, more young people achieved post-compulsory qualifications and entered higher education in Scotland than elsewhere. The different education system in Scotland was the key factor. The socio-economic context of Scotland was similar to that in the north of England and Wales, but attainment of post-compulsory qualifications and entry to HE were substantially higher in Scotland than in the south of England.

Acknowledgements

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